

TONGAN KIN GROUPS: THE NOBLE AND THE COMMON VIEW⁽¹⁾

Shulamit R. Decktor Korn
City University of New York

The focus on the upper classes in society, or upon who the political leaders are and what they do, is common among Polynesian specialists. The noble view in anthropology is most notable in the recent book by Goldman⁽²⁾ which focuses almost exclusively on Polynesian systems of aristocracy. Despite his title, Goldman makes it quite clear in the body of the monograph that his concern and interest are only in the upper ranks. In *Social Stratification in Polynesia*,⁽³⁾ Sahlins also adopts a noble view. In his analysis of Tongan political organisation, he equates the *ha'a* system of Tonga with the kinship system, something he could not have done if he had moved his gaze from the top of the social hierarchy.⁽⁴⁾ Contrasting with these noble views, Beaglehole⁽⁵⁾ Aoyagi⁽⁶⁾ and Morton⁽⁷⁾ make it clear that they are writing about commoners and give relatively little attention to the rank aspects of kinship. Thus, the title of this paper refers not only to Tongans' views, but also to those of anthropologists.

Since the publication of *Social Stratification in Polynesia*, further data about Tongan kinship have become available in a number of articles.⁽⁸⁾ It is now quite clear that the *ha'a* is not the only kind of Tongan kin group.

1. The data presented in this paper are based on material collected mainly in Tongatapu. As such, they may be untypical of the situation in areas of Tonga that are less subject to rapid change. Field work in Tongatapu was carried out from July 1969 to May 1970 with the aid of an International Fellowship from the American Association of University Women, whose support is gratefully acknowledged.

An earlier version of the paper was presented at the ASAO (Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania) Symposium on recent research in Samoa and Tonga at the 70th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Toronto, Canada, December 1972. The paper has benefited from extended discussion with Fred Korn and comments on the earlier version by Sharon Tiffany and Charles Urbanowicz.

2. Goldman 1970.
3. Sahlins 1958.
4. Beaglehole's study of a contemporary village is cited by Sahlins in his bibliography. A reading of Beaglehole in conjunction with Gifford makes it clear that there must have been more to the kinship system than Gifford has to say about it.
5. 1941.
6. 1966.
7. 1972.
8. Aoyagi 1966; Bott 1972; Kaepler 1971.

TONGAN KIN GROUPS: THE NOBLE & THE COMMON VIEW

114 and that *ha'a* do not operate at the local level in modern Tonga.⁽⁹⁾ To
 [613] date, kinship in its rank aspects and kinship operating at the local level have
 [61] not been dealt with together in one publication, except in passing, and
 it is extremely difficult for anyone not acquainted at first hand with the
 Tongan data either to understand the nature of the Tongan kinship system
 or to relate the different things various writers have to say about it. Part
 of the reason for this difficulty is that accounts of observations of con-
 temporary affairs have been mingled with the traditions and history of
 121 the past 300 years.⁽¹⁰⁾ This paper, therefore, is concerned mainly with
 giving an account of the more important kinds of Tongan kin groups as
 they exist today and differentiating their scope of affairs, referring as
 much as possible to existing publications.

RANK AND KINSHIP AT THE SOCIETAL LEVEL

613 According to the anthropological literature, there are at least two quite
 [612] different kinds of kin grouping in Tonga. One of these is the *ha'a*, which
 is a descent-based group that has been referred to by one writer as a
 "societal division"⁽¹¹⁾ and by most others either as a lineage or as a
 612 ramage or status-lineage.⁽¹²⁾ The other type of kin-group is a sort of
 kindred that has variously been identified as the *fa'ahinga* or *famili* or
matakali.⁽¹³⁾ I shall refer to it as the *famili*, which is the term I heard most
 commonly used.

613 Not everyone in Tonga is affiliated both with a *ha'a* and a *famili*. In
 612 Goldman's words, "only the upper ranks can be said to belong to a
 565 lineage organisation at all."⁽¹⁴⁾ This does not mean that chief's kin groups
 are of the *ha'a* type while commoners' are of the *famili* type, for both
 that chiefs and commoners are involved in the *famili* system; nor does it mean
 565 that chiefs and commoners are descended from different ancestors and
 for that reason do not belong to the same descent groups. A commoner
 is simply "an individual who by virtue of descent through a series of
 younger brothers has in the course of generations become further and
 further removed,"⁽¹⁵⁾ geneologically speaking, from the chiefly persons
 565 with whom he has ancestors in common. Thus, although the boundary
 613 between the chiefly class and the commoners is not precise, only persons
 who are closely associated with high chiefly rank are involved in the
ha'a system.

Nowadays, there are about 10 main *ha'a*. A *ha'a* is based on a grouping
 of chiefly titles, each of which is said to have originated with a particular
 [554] descendant of a common ancestor. In turn, these originating ancestors
 were high-ranking kinsmen of the ruling kings of Tonga at various points

9. Whether the *ha'a* operated at the local level in aboriginal Tonga is still a matter for debate.

10. To the best of my knowledge, Urbanowicz (1972) is the first anthropologist to have insisted that the Tonga of the twentieth century is not a reliable guide to aboriginal Tonga.

11. Kaepler 1971.

12. Gifford 1929; Sahlins 1958; Goldman 1970; Hui 1972.

13. Gifford 1929; Aoyagi 1966; Kaepler 1971; Morton 1972.

14. Goldman 1970:242.

15. Gifford 1929:30.

TONGAN KIN GROUPS: THE NOBLE & THE COMMON VIEW

613 that commoners do not belong to *ha'a*, but also—as Morton has expressed
 565 it—that “commoners are commoners *because* they are not members of
ha'a.⁽²¹⁾

When the system was first described in detail, by Gifford in 1929,
 613 *ha'a* were identified as lineages. In 1959, however, Davenport analysed
 565 the structure of non-unilinear descent and pointed out that “the features
 612 that might clearly differentiate the stem kindred from the sept become
 [611] blurred in some instances, and the Tongan *ha'a* provides an excellent
 example.”⁽²²⁾ A *ha'a* may be viewed as a sept—that is, a non-unilinear
 descent group—so far as the mode of tracing filiation is concerned. How-
 ever, it is a stem kindred rather than a descent group in that there is
 collateral limitation on the range of descendants who are included in the
 group, with the branching stem consisting of the lines of titleholders.
 613 It is the branching feature of the connection among titles that Sahlins⁽²³⁾
 565 identified in speaking of the *ha'a* as a ramage, a term introduced by
 Firth.⁽²⁴⁾ It was the focus on the validation of rank that led Goldman to
 114 identify the *ha'a* as a status lineage;⁽²⁵⁾ and it was the emphasis on succe-
 [612] sion in the male line that led Gifford⁽²⁶⁾ to speak of the *ha'a* as a pat-
 [61] rilineage. In these analyses, the *ha'a* system was either explicitly identified
 as being coterminous with the kinship system, or the relationship between
ha'a—as corporate organisations of kin—and the rest of the kinship
 system remained unclear.

613 It was left to Kaeppler⁽²⁷⁾ to point out that *ha'a* must not be identified
 565 as comprising the totality of the kinship system. *Ha'a* are part of what
 114 Kaeppler calls the societal structure. They can be understood only if they
 61 are viewed as having to do with relative status among people of the highest
 554 rank in modern Tongan society.⁽²⁸⁾ According to Kaeppler, “in order to
 understand rank within Tongan society, one must conceptually distinguish
 social status, governing relationships within a small social group, from
 societal ranking, governing relationships within society as a whole”.⁽²⁹⁾
 114 This distinction suggests Fortes’ distinction⁽³⁰⁾ between the jural sphere,
 which Kaeppler calls the societal structure, and the domestic sphere,
 which Kaeppler identifies as the kinship system or the social structure.
 The distinction is extremely useful, although I prefer to refer to the societal
 sphere and the domestic sphere and view kinship as one of the frameworks
 for reckoning relationships within both spheres.

21. Morton 1972:52 (emphasis added).

22. Davenport 1959:563.

23. 1958.

24. 1936.

25. Goldman 1970.

26. 1929.

27. 1971.

28. Neither Beaglehole nor Aoyagi attempted to account for the finding that their commoner informants had little or no knowledge of the *ha'a* system, something that Gifford had dealt with only in very ambiguous terms (1929:29-33). Kaeppler explained that it is because *ha'a* are the affairs of chiefs and therefore not known to commoners. Her analysis suggests that the *ha'a* as they are presently constituted existed also in aboriginal times. In my view, this has yet to be proven.

29. Kaeppler 1971:174.

30. Fortes 1958.

DOMESTIC KIN GROUPS

Within the domestic sphere, Tongans distinguish three kinds of kin-based groups.⁽³¹⁾ There is the household group, the *'api*, which is defined in terms of common residence and consumption and includes also the sharing of land that is held locally by members of the *'api*. Members mainly and usually, but not necessarily, are all close kin to one another. Most households are based on an elementary family or on a three-generation extended family group, numbering 2 to 32 individuals with an average of 7 persons per household.⁽³²⁾ In many cases a household includes attached individuals—related lineally, cognatically or affinally—who have moved in for a few days, a few weeks, or even a few years.

The second kind of grouping is the *kainga*, which is an ego-based personal kindred that does not include affines. From time to time, groups based on *kainga* relationships are activated. The most typical of such occasions are funerals, when members of the *kainga* of close relatives of the deceased come to pay their respects. They come because of their relationship not to the deceased but to the bereaved. A *kainga*, then, is an unrestricted grouping with an ego reference, based on consanguineal kinship.

Finally, there is the *famili*, which cuts across the *kainga*.⁽³³⁾ *Kainga* is mainly a relationship category while *famili* is an action group that provides goods labour, and personnel when they are needed, as well as access to land for subsistence purposes. While *kainga* ties transcend local boundaries, the *famili* is a village-based group and, like the household, it is a local group that includes affines. Membership in the *kainga* is simply a matter of kinship relationships; membership in the *famili* is defined by participation in its activities of the *famili*.

The constitution of the *famili* is even more troublesome to delineate than that of the *ha'a*. Like the *ha'a*, it has features that make it look like both a non-unilinear descent group—that is, a sept—and a stem kindred; but it could also be described as a loose association of households linked by consanguineal ties. The core or stem of the membership of any one *famili* consists of a number of adult individuals in the village who are related to one another as siblings or as descendants of siblings, both male and female. The total membership of a *famili* includes these individuals, their children and grandchildren, the spouses of these people, and any other persons who are more than merely transient members of their households. Membership, however, is completely optative; a person can be affiliated with a *famili* so long as he or she is able to claim a kinship connection with the *famili* and have that claim accepted by the *famili*'s membership, even if the geneological connection is more remote than usual.

31. Beaglehole 1941; Aoyagi 1966; Morton 1972.

32. Fiefla 1968. These figures on household size are from the 1966 Tonga Government census. In 1970, in a village census of 145 households, I found household size numbered up to 26 individuals, with an average of 8 persons per household.

33. Aoyagi devotes considerable attention to a description of the functions and organisation of the *famili*. She uses the terms "*famili*:" and "*famili* organisation" to refer to what I have identified as the *kainga* and the *famili*.